



Trauma: Prevent, Treat, and Heal

What is trauma?

- Trauma is a stressful thing that happens that makes a person feel unsafe. Trauma can happen as an isolated event (for example, a car accident), or something that happens over time (for example, a child witnessing repeated violence in their home). Depending on what type of trauma happened and somebody's reaction to it, the effect of trauma (or "traumatic stress") can be called different things - For example, "Acute stress response", "chronic stress response", or "PTSD". Experiencing trauma can also lead to other challenges, like problems focusing, learning problems, anxiety, depression, and behavior problems like defiance and tantrums. We also know that experiencing trauma as a child can lead to higher rates of medical problems as an adult, like lung problems and heart disease. This is because exposure to trauma, especially over the long-term or repeated events, increases stress hormones in the body, which leads to inflammation and can harm the body over time.

What are some examples of trauma?

- Trauma can come in many forms. Here is a list of some examples:
- Physical, sexual, or psychological abuse and neglect (including trafficking)
- Natural disasters
- Family or community violence
- Terrorism, mass violence, and school shootings
- Discrimination, prejudice, and racism
- Loss of a loved one
- Substance use disorder (personal or familial)
- Traumatic separation (including as part of an immigration journey or incarceration)
- Refugee and war experiences
- Serious accidents or life-threatening illness
- Military family-related stressors (e.g., deployment, parental loss or injury)

What are signs of traumatic stress in my child?

- Difficulty sleeping and nightmares
- Refusing to go to school
- Lack of appetite
- Bed-wetting or other behaviors they used to do when they were younger
- Problems with developmental milestones
- Anger or aggression (fights at school or with siblings)
- Problems paying attention to teachers at school and to parents at home
- Avoiding scary situations
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Nervousness or jumpiness
- Intrusive memories of what happened
- Play that includes recreating the event



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How do we treat traumatic stress (short term)?

- If your child is showing signs of traumatic stress for more than a couple weeks, it is important to allow them to process the trauma with a mental health professional, like a therapist or a school counselor. Talking about the trauma with family can also be helpful, but it's important that children be able to process what happened with someone outside of the family without the pressure or expectation to act or behave in a certain way.
- Things you can do at home that we know help with traumatic stress include:
- Offer frequent reassurance. Remind your child that they are safe and the reasons WHY. For example, instead of saying, "Don't worry, you are safe." you could say "You are safe because dad is here with you making sure everything is okay, we've locked all the doors, and our apartment is full of people who look after each other."
- Continue to tell your child they are not responsible. Thinking that something is your fault can add a huge amount of stress to an already stressful event.
- Make time to play with your child in ways that they decide. Children often express themselves and work through fears through play and this is an important part of recovery.
- Maintain routine. Having a daily routine that a child can rely on for home and school is important because experiencing a trauma oftentimes feels like a loss of control.
- Be patient! Recovering from traumatic stress takes time and there is no specific timeframe. Pushing kids to "get over it" or pressuring them to recovery more quickly than they are ready to, can add to the stress and prevent healing.

How do we help children prevent and heal from trauma (long term)?

- Sometimes kids who have experienced a lot of trauma can struggle more long-term with the effects, like mental health or behavior problems. The good news is that we know that kids can heal from trauma and also build resilience, which protects them from traumatic stress in the future. The ways to heal from and prevent the effects of trauma are shown below in the "Stress Busters" graphic. Each of the categories listed is backed up by research showing it is an effective way to treat trauma. It is important to know that the single most important way to heal from and prevent the effects of trauma is having a supportive, loving adult who cares about a child's wellbeing and can help them get the support they need.